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SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth – A gendered analysis

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ABSTRACT

SDG 8 calls for promoting 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'. Even as it highlights the importance of labour rights for all, it also makes visible some significant tensions. We note, for example, that despite many critiques of narrow economic measures of growth, the focus here remains on GDP and per capita growth. This is problematic, we argue, because the GDP productive boundary excludes much of social reproductive work. This puts SDG8 in tension with SDG 5 which calls for the recognition of the value of unpaid care and domestic work. There has been a significant increase in the rate of working women in the formal and informal sector. However, there has not been a subsequent gender shift in the doing of social reproductive work. In this paper we argue SDG 8's focus on decent work and economic growth is inadequate; that productive employment and decent work for all men and women by 2030 needs to take into account the value and costs of social reproduction. We trace key historical debates on work to argue that both gender and labour rights have to underpin SDG 8 if its promise of inclusive, sustainable and decent work is to be realized.

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...domestic labour, often the most wearisome and unending known to any section of the human race, is not adequately recognised or recompensed. ...I believe it will in the future (Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*; 1911).

...the domestic sector...cannot be treated as a bottomless well, able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from the other sectors (Diane Elson, 2000:28).

1. Introduction

In this paper we build on feminist debates on gender and work to argue that Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocates 'sustainable economic growth and decent work for all' falls short of its own ambition by not addressing issues of social reproductive work and therefore of gender equality. The emphasis placed on GDP and per capita growth as indicators for its targets, we argue, neglects the value and costs of social reproduction. Unless SDG 8 takes into account unpaid work that continues to be largely performed by women, it cannot address the

decent work agenda in a comprehensive and gendered way.¹ To make our case, we highlight the concept of social reproductive work,² which helps us outline two aspects of work that are overlooked in SDG 8: first, much of social reproductive work remains unpaid and is therefore not captured in the GDP; second, even where paid, the work is gender segregated in the labour market, precarious and undervalued in terms of wages and conditions of work, i.e. gender inequality persists. We show how, if SDG 8 was to be put in conversation with SDG 5 ('gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls'), the unresolved tensions between these two Goals make for an unsustainable and unequal policy framework to address both decent work and persistent gender inequality globally.

¹ In focusing on unpaid domestic work, we underline the difference between this work within the household, paid work in the labour market and informal paid work, which 'involves the paid production and sale of goods or services which are unregistered by, or hidden from the state for tax, benefit and/or labour law purposes, but which are legal in all other respects' (SBC, 2004, p 9 in Joseph Rowntree, 2006 ix; see also p. 6 below and Pahl, 1988). The three are connected – conditions and distribution of one affects the other.

² We discuss the concept of social reproduction on p. 5. In brief, we view social reproduction as the reproduction of life itself, which includes the reproduction and care of human beings, production within the home and informal labour that supports and sometimes challenges the cultural infrastructure of social relations.

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We make our argument by critically analysing the Decent Work Agenda of SDG 8 in the context of the debates among various state and non-state actors that most recently took the shape of the International Labour Organisation's Convention 189 (ILO, 2011). We draw attention to the social struggles that have led to this Convention – those of the trade unions as well as women's groups to underscore how a more gendered approach to decent work cannot be taken for granted. We then note how these gendered gaps constrain the parameters of SDG 8. We further argue that if appropriate attention is not paid to social reproduction as a critically important part of the Decent Work Agenda, we will not be able to address the depletion that is accrued and experienced in performing this work. A productive conversation between SDG 8 and SDG 5 is then, we conclude, important to challenge a growth-led approach to development; we need an approach that focuses on a gendered measure of development, which also chimes with interventions made by degrowth scholars.³ Through this analysis we demonstrate that gender is an arc that needs to connect the two SDGs we focus on, although such gendered analysis could also benefit other SDGs, if development is to be sustainable as well as equitable.

2. SDG 8 and the decent work agenda

On the 25th of September 2015, the UN's 193 member states voted to formally adopt the SDGs, a set of seventeen goals and 169 sub-targets envisaged as a template to guide and inform global policy-making up until 2030. Conceived of as the successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are the principal articulation of a collective vision for global development, seeking a 'reinvigorated global partnership' to address a range of critical social, economic and environmental concerns (UN, 2015). SDGs are anchored in a discourse of universal human rights, and unlike the narrow conceptual frame of their predecessors, are accompanied by 'explicit acknowledgement that equality must apply not only to opportunities, but also outcomes' (Ravazi, 2016, pp 28). In contrast to the MDGs, widely derided as the product of an opaque and elitist decision-making process excluding all but a 'triad' of powerful nations (Amin, 2006), the SDGs have been acclaimed as the product of a participatory drafting exercise. This has involved an inter-governmental Open Work Group (OWG) and input from civil society 'stakeholders' across 88 countries to shape the emerging agenda. Nevertheless, claims of 'participation' fail to fully resonate in a process dominated by INGOs, multinational corporations and state actors, who are often, although differently vested in the status quo, are equipped with greater resources to influence the agenda compared to the marginalised sectors of society whose lives the SDGs aims to transform. This is particularly evident in cases where the Means of Implementation (MOI) are vague and open to manipulation. More specifically, it has been argued that there is a risk of corporate capture, a democratic deficit in decision-making, absence of sanction mechanisms for non-participation, and a marked reluctance to deviate from dominant economic paradigms (Carant, 2017; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Dingwerth & Pattberg, 2009; Ravazi, 2016; Sachs, 2017). Overall, one could argue that the SDGs remain susceptible to many of the same pitfalls of previous global governance regimes. We are concerned with a particular participatory deficit – the gender issue in labour rights – which forms the focus of this paper. We are also concerned with the context within which debates on degrowth address the issue of care (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Eicker & Keil, 2017; Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010).

As noted above, we centre our analysis on SDG 8, which calls for sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and produc-

tive employment and decent work for all. SDG8 has twelve targets, which include at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries; diversification, technological upgrading and innovation; growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services; decouple economic growth from environmental degradation. It further sets a target of 'full and productive work for all by 2030, as well as 'equal work of equal value'; eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking; promote sustainable tourism and increase Aid for Trade support for developing countries. Finally, it suggests a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization (UN, 2015). The scope, range and focus of this Goal we argue generates tensions and contradictions that undermine its coherence and its targets (see also Ponte & Rodríguez-Enríquez, 2016 about SDGs more generally).

SDG8 implicitly builds on the ILO's Decent Work agenda, with its four 'core standards' – freedom from forced labour, freedom from child labour, freedom from discrimination at work; freedom to form and join a union, and to bargain collectively. This itself is the product of longstanding and contentious debates between corporate and state actors, trade unions, NGOs, women's organisations, and emerging labour groups of the informal sector (see below and also McIntyre, 2008; Standing, 2008; Vosko, 2002). In response to the claims articulated by feminist and labour movements, ILO's core standards recognize the need to address diverse and varied experiences of the workplace:

'To promote decent and productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. All workers have the right to decent work, not only those working in the formal economy, but also the self-employed, casual and informal economy workers, as well as those, predominantly women, working in the care economy and private households' (ILO, 2012, pp v).

To this end, the ILO has gradually broadened its remit to consider, firstly, informal labour – those forms of unregulated and sub-contract work, which have acquired heightened significance in an era of globalisation (Bangasser, 2000; Beneria & Feldman, 1992; Harris-White, 2009; Kabeer, 2004; Runyan, 2016), and secondly, the issue of paid domestic work, which is still performed largely by women (D'Souza, 2010; Eicker & Keil, 2017; Fish, 2015). The two forms of labour are often connected. A landmark achievement in this regard was the adoption of Convention 189 on paid domestic workers in 2011, which sought to set minimum standards for work and provide basic protections for workers in this sector. This built upon earlier conventions addressing gender inequality in the workplace, including the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) and the Convention is the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), an illustration of the dynamic and evolving nature of the Decent Work Agenda. However, the focus of Convention 189 remains on paid domestic work; it does not cover unpaid domestic work, which remains overwhelmingly the responsibility of women.

Since the 1990s, there has also been another shift in ILO's approach – from pressing for recourse to legally binding regulatory instruments, to advocating corporate social responsibility (CSR), voluntary codes of conduct, and a discourse of 'social dialogue' (Haus, 2016). This reflects, we argue, the ascendancy of the neoliberal ideology in this period and, in turn, finds echoes in the aspirational nature of SDGs, which possess neither legal force nor holding to account UN member states if they fail to deliver.⁴

³ Sustainable degrowth aspires to equitably downscaling production and consumption in order to increase human well-being and enhance ecological conditions and equity on the planet (Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alier, 2010).

⁴ For our purposes here, neoliberalism denotes the most recent phase of global capitalism and can best be understood as the ideological frame that has underpinned global policymaking since the late 1970s, asserting the primacy of 'self-regulating' markets as the most appropriate mechanism for organising the economy and society.

Kabeer (2004) has pointed out that more than forty years of neoliberal globalisation and labour market deregulation has precipitated a shift away from ‘regular, male-dominated, full-time employment, protected by various forms of state regulation... to more diverse and less-protected patterns of work, outsourcing, contract labour, casual, part-time, and home-based work’ (2004, p. 6). As a result, a renewed focus on the need for ‘decent work’ seems timely. However, in both its policy prescriptions and its underlying logic, SDG 8 remains wedded to, at best, neo-Keynesian variants of economic analysis. As we have pointed out above, SDG 8 seems to synthesise a commitment to full employment and improved working conditions with a renewed push for financializing of the economy and ‘sustained economic growth’ (target 8.1). This ambition sits in tension with other goals, for example SDG 5. As Seguino (2000) has shown, the entry of women into cheap labour markets might support economic growth but does not assist gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. Without strategies for redistributing unpaid domestic labour within the household, an emphasis on paid decent work, although important, can only remain a limited approach to gender equality. Similarly, tackling inequalities within and between countries (SDG 10), responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), and combatting climate change (SDG 13) do not sit easily with a focus on sustained economic growth. Throughout the remainder of this article, we seek to disentangle these contradictions, highlighting in particular the gendered tensions between SDG 8 and SDG 5.⁵ Without this, we argue, we risk overlooking the harm that accrues to those who do this work without any recognition or recompense (cf. Rai, Hoskyns & Thomas, 2014). We also point out that while SDG 8 sets GDP as a measure of growth, the work of many feminist economists has shown that this measure is deeply flawed, as it does not include unpaid domestic work (Bakker, 2007; Elson, 2000; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007; Picchio, 1992). We argue that the eventual success or failure to deliver the targets of SDG 8 will depend upon how these contradictions are addressed.

Social reproductive work within the household is still largely perceived as women’s work. This preconception influences not just women’s labour market participation (supply side) but also labour recruitment (demand-side) decisions; markets are after all gendered institutions (Fraser, 2014). Therefore, even within the framework of a monetized economy, which privileges economic growth, prevailing gendered norms of the labour market mean not just a loss of realizing human capital worth but also the neglect of social reproductive work. Social reproduction was traditionally used as a descriptive category and set against production as a way of designating the known world and all the activities within it. Since the emphasis on production as the central productive activity, social reproduction has become a ‘second-level’ activity and is either undervalued or not valued at all (Hoskyns & Rai, 2016, pp. 394; Waring, 1988). Our working definition of social reproduction includes the following: a) it includes biological reproduction, which includes the reproduction of labour, the provision of sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain households; b) production in the home, of both goods and services as well as social provisioning and voluntary work (Hoskyns & Rai, 2016, pp. 394; see also Bakker, 2007; Dalla Costa & James, 1971; Humphries, 1977; Mies, 1986); c) reproduction of culture and ideology, which stabilises and (sometimes challenges) dominant social relations (Laslett & Brenner, 1989). As Bhattacharya (2017) has noted, social reproduction allows for a more commodious approach to what constitutes the economy and treats questions of gender inequality as structurally reproduced through capitalist social relations. Such outlining of social reproduction has led fem-

inist economists to view the home not just for altruism and/or consumption but for multiple gendered transfers between individuals, the market and the state (Folbre, 2001). What is clear is that both paid and unpaid social reproductive work are deeply gendered and underpin both formal and informal labour markets. Unpaid social reproductive work remains outside the GDP production boundary.

Feminists, including Beneria (1979); Beneria and Sen (1981), Elson (2000), Fraser (2013), Mies (1986), Walby (1988), and Werner (2012, 2016), have long pointed to the analytical links and transmission channels between paid and unpaid work, gendered outcomes in the labour market and how an emphasis on economic growth was undervalued, disregarding women’s multiple roles within the productive and reproductive spheres. Across the world, the division of labour tends to be structured according to prevailing patriarchal norms, with the workplace operating as a site where gender is ‘enforced, performed, and recreated’ (Weeks, 2011, pp 9; see also Fraser, 2013; Mies, 1986; Walby, 1988; Werner, 2012, 2016). While feminist scholars embracing the varieties of capitalism argument note how the same institutions have differential effects on men and women and acknowledge that gender inequality is multi-faceted (Estevez-Abe, 2009), they also acknowledge that “the link between gender regimes and certain features of the political economy is likely to require a household-based model of policy reference” (ibid: 189). We are inspired by feminist political economy perspectives that have a central concern not just with the economic underpinnings of the global capitalist economy but which also incorporate the masculinist cultural order and the differentiated valuation of work. We work with feminist scholarship that has pointed to the capitalist system’s inability to reconcile gender equality (Werner et al., 2017:3, Strauss, 2015; Wohl, 2014). For instance, Mies (1986), pp 110) attributed the gendered division of labour to the legacy of ‘housewifisation’, understood as an ideological process that produces new, gendered subjectivities and relations of production under capitalism. In the West, from the nineteenth century onwards, the belief in a monogamous, nuclear family became institutionalised, and the image of the ‘good, Christian woman’ carved out a new, private arena of the household where, as a mother and wife to the male ‘breadwinner’, she would be tasked with responsibility for the family, born out of ‘love’ and requiring new forms of consumption to fulfil her womanly duties. Consequently, women’s labour was ‘externalised and ex-territorialised’, considered ‘supplementary’ to formalised, paid work and leaving them atomised and disorganised, with an attendant decline in the possibilities of political and bargaining power. This model of women’s labour and subjectivity was rolled out as the ‘norm’ in the colonies, and Mies’ pays particular attention to the subsequent devaluing of women’s labour in these spaces through ‘self-help’ development interventions and poverty eradication programmes:

‘Women are the optimal labour force because they are now being universally defined as ‘housewives’, not as workers; this means their work, whether in use value or commodity production, is obscured, does not appear as ‘free wage labour’, is defined as an ‘income-generating activity’, and can hence be bought at a much cheaper price than male labour’ (Mies, 1986, pp 118).

Instead of paying heed to these debates development policy agencies retain a bifurcated understanding of our gendered worlds.⁶ We argue that in the absence of any overarching analysis

⁵ The visual representation of SDGs that we are so familiar with (see below), underlines the silo like and problem-solving approach to sustainable development: each SDG is ‘boxed in’, with seemingly no connection to the ones next to it.

⁶ To illustrate, the central import of this neglect of gendered analysis to policy outcomes – and SDGs specifically – is captured by Zacharias (2017), who calls for “integrating household production into the measurement and understanding of deprivation”, including time deprivation (2017:8). We discuss this work later in the paper.

of 'how gender, as a set of context-specific meanings and practices, intersects with the structure of global capitalism and its systemic logic of value extraction and capital accumulation' (Bair, 2010, pp. 205; see also Bakker, 2007; Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2013; Hewamanne, 2008; Lynch, 2007; Werner, 2016), the SDGs will fail to effectively counter gendered forms of exploitation within global labour regimes. We build on this feminist contention to highlight how, whilst the circumstances of women will differ greatly according to race, class, age and other facets of their identity, their labour has consistently been rendered invisible or undervalued.⁷ As Jennifer Bair observes, 'how gender matters in a particular location... is variable and contingent; that gender matters is not' (Bair, 2010, pp. 205). SDG 8 cannot then be successful in delivering 'decent work for all' unless economic growth is decentred, paid employment as well as unpaid social reproductive work are recognised as important contributions to society and properly valued and recompensed through state supported mechanisms, non-state initiatives and through cooperative and community actions.

3. From trade unions to the ILO, a history of women's struggle

It has taken the ILO nearly a century – ninety-four years – to recognise the importance of the rights of paid domestic workers, overwhelming numbers of which are women. ILO's Convention 189 on domestic workers, passed in 2013, emerges out of a long history of struggle for recognition not only from women's and feminist mobilisations, but also by the wider labour movement. The valuing of women's unpaid labour was ignored not only by the scholarship of neoclassical economics, but also the early trade unions and the labour movement. As Silvia Federici (2004, 2012; see also Bhattacharya, 2017) notes, even Marx's analysis failed to value work outside of commodity production, whilst neglecting the violent disciplining of women and gendered forms of dispossession that occurred in the early stages of capitalism.⁸ Workers movements, such as the Chartists and International Workingmen's Association (First International) active in nineteenth century Britain, were formed primarily to represent the interests of industrial workers, and correspondingly, largely reflected a 'white, male, productivist' paradigm (Mellor, 1996, pp. 133). Trade unions were slow to acknowledge and incorporate the concerns of women, and omitted recognition of how waged work was effectively subsidised by the un- and under paid work of social reproduction.

As we have shown above, there is a complex relationship between paid and unpaid work of social reproduction. Feminist work has addressed both these aspects of social reproduction. Federici draws attention to the primacy of women's unpaid domestic work, sexuality and procreation as practices indispensable to capitalism, describing it as 'unfree labour, revealing the umbilical connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position' (Federici, 2012, pp. 97). Following debates between Humphries and Barrett over the desirability of a 'family wage' in either alleviating or compounding women's subordination under capitalism (Barrett & McIntosh, 1980; Humphries, 1977), Mies (1986) sought to advance the argu-

ment that Marx's analysis of the value of labour power was based on his assumption that each worker had a 'non-working' housewife. She examined the 'proletarian anti-feminism' of German industrial workers in the early nineteenth century, which largely accepted bourgeois conceptions of the nuclear family. This resulted in the 'male breadwinner model' of employment – conceiving of women as wives and mothers rather than as workers. Indeed, in some cases men expressed concern at the entry of women into industrial labour force, and the effect it might have on their jobs and wages (*ibid*: 107). Domestic work commitments hence acted as a barrier that hindered women's participation in the labour market, leaving women atomised and without collective representation.

Historically then, trade unions have been castigated by feminist scholars and activists as 'bastions of male privilege', limited to articulating the interests of men in the formal sector (McIntyre, 2008; Padmanabhan, 2011; Ruwanpura, 2004). Across the world, the historical composition and culture of trade unions has tended to exclude women or leave them on the margins. In South Asia for example, trade unions are often institutionally attached to political parties, which have neglected concerns of the majority of workers in the informal sector (Kabeer, 2004; Padmanabhan, 2011). For example, in Bolivia, in the midst of the rolling out of Structural Adjustment Policies imposed by international creditors, the wives of unemployed tin miners organised into an association to resist the closure of mines on which their families' livelihoods depended. Yet, in organising outside of the formal miners' union, these women also endured *machismo* from their own husbands who discouraged their political autonomy (McFarren, 1992). In countries, ranging from Turkey to Ghana, a culture of hegemonic masculinity pervades in many unions, which continue to be perceived primarily as the territory of skilled industrial workers, deterring women's participation and resulting in a marked gender bias towards men in leadership roles (Ledwith, 2012). Nevertheless, through the efforts of trade unions, notable gains have been made in advancing the right to paid maternity and paternity leave, free childcare, flexi-time working hours, and securing remedial action to address the gender pay gap, for example through pay audits and anti-discrimination legislation, especially in the contexts where women's mobilisations into the labour market have been significant. However, in their analysis of trade union work on work-life balance in France and the UK, Gregory and Milner (2009) find that only a few trade unions have been active in this area, particularly in the public sector, but 'within severe constraints defined by employer initiative' (2009: 122). Trade Unions have thus been vehicles of struggles for worker and gender equality but have also reflected traditional patriarchal norms of work regimes and mobilisations.⁹

Nancy Fraser (2016) identifies three distinct work regimes in the modern era, each with a different relationship to feminised labour. First, under the liberal, competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century, women were largely confined to the private sphere of domesticity and their labour within the home remained invisible; second, under post-war state-managed capitalism in Western nations, Fraser notes the rise of the modern ideal of 'the male breadwinner' and the 'family wage' and support for the internalisation of social reproduction through enhanced state/corporate provision of social welfare; and third, since the 1970s, the current iteration of globalised financial capitalism, characterised by recruitment of women into the paid workforce following the relocation of industrial manufacturing to low-wage regions, the

⁷ For the purposes of this paper we focus primarily on how feminised labour is devalued under global capitalism. Although this leaves other aspects of gender identity and its relationship with decent work unaddressed, it is intended to highlight the recurrent and prevailing attitudes which have tended towards gender essentialism through an overarching focus on 'women and girls' (Cornwell and Rivas, 2015). We would welcome future research addressing the specific implications of the SDGs for trans, queer, gay, intersex and gender non-conforming people.

⁸ Engels (2004) was not entirely blind to this latter point however, theorising the subordinate role of women under the nuclear family, which he attributed to the formation of class society, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). This writing highlighted early connections between the rise of property regimes and exclusions of women from the sphere of formal production.

⁹ These paternalistic and protectionist biases can be clearly seen in the ILO Preamble, which mentions women only once – 'protection of children, young persons and women'.

externalisation of care work and welfare to families and communities, and the phenomenon of 'dual wage earners' (*ibid.*: 104).

While Fraser's analysis remains largely embedded in the history of the capitalist regimes of the global North, we can also note the enduring effects of colonisation and empire operative here – in the gendered and racialised regimes of assembly lines, rural food production and care provisions (Benería, Deere, & Kabeer, 2012; De Schutter, 2013; Gamburd, 2000; Hirschchild, 2002; Lynch, 2007; Ong, 2006; Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016; Safri & Graham, 2010; Siddiqui, 2009; Standing, 1999; Yeates, 2012). While these feminist scholars rightly registered the gendered patterns of employment created through neo-liberal policies that made export processing zones a central plank of incursion into economies of the global South, it is only now the profound effects that factory closures have on those made dependent on assembly line jobs is being unearthed (Dutta, 2016; Werner 2016). The social harm referenced by Rai et al. (2014b) manifests in multiple spheres – not just through the life course but also for communities when labour is made redundant en masse.

Across Asia, Africa and Latin America, the 'feminisation of labour' can be observed in the process of neoliberal restructuring, which has globalised production through increasingly integrated and complex value chains extending across the world (Çağatay & Özler, 1995; Fontana & Wood, 2013; Runyan, 2016; Standing, 1999; Werner 2016). The integration of women into the world market, accelerating flows of migration, and relocation of manufacturing to free trade and export processing zones in low-wage countries, such as China, the Dominican Republic, India, Mexico, and Sri Lanka, has resulted in growing numbers of workers available for exploitation, the weakening of collective action by organised labour, and a corresponding drop in labour cost for corporations and factory owners (Dutta, 2016; Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mies, 1986; Ruwanpura, 2016; Standing, 1999; Werner, 2012; Wright, 2004). Illustrative of this trend, in the 1980s Bangladesh witnessed the emergence of export processing enclaves as sectoral employment was reorganised into cottage-based home production units and subcontracting firms, resulting in increasingly diffuse chains of accountability, growing precariousness and a decline of collective bargaining under the guise of 'flexibilisation' (Feldman, 1992; Standing, 1989; see also Ong, 2006). In view of such developments, disasters, like the Rana Plaza factory fire in Bangladesh, are ultimately unsurprising (Prentice & De Neve, 2017). In addition, the mobilisation of women's labour in the context of a continued gendered division of social reproductive work increases the pressures of work and depletes women's health and well-being as they balance paid and unpaid work. This potentially feeds into an economy of disappearances and neglect of working women and the working poor, which becomes particularly acute during economic crisis and when disinvestment takes place (Dutta, 2016; Sanyal, 2007; Werner, 2016).

However, these regimes of labour have also opened up new terrains of struggle and fostered new, transnational solidarities. Shifting patterns of production and consumption, the proliferation of advocacy networks linking workers across borders, and the rise of digital technologies and new media, have all reconfigured the strategies employed by activists and labour organisations to mobilise and assert women's rights as workers. The effects of second and third wave feminism on the labour movement have both shifted ground in what Fraser (2016) describes as 'boundary struggles' about exactly what counts as 'productive' work. Historical milestones in these boundary struggles have included: the *Wages for Housework* movement, which emerged in Italy to popularise the idea of the 'social factory' (Dalla Costa and James, 1971); the women's strike (or 'Women's Day Off') in Iceland in 1975, which forced the closure of many banks, factories and shops and in Spain in 2018; and the emergence of grassroots solidarity models of economic organisations, such as India's Self Employed Women's Asso-

ciation (SEWA), which since the 1970s has supported homeworkers, street vendors, and others in the informal sector to form cooperatives. These prefigured dynamic new forms of resistance and collective action emerging exercised by workers in the neoliberal era, all demonstrate the growing confidence of women exercising collective power.¹⁰ Such endeavours exist in defiance of anticipated practices of citizenship and state sovereignty, as women resist the cultural logics that envisage them as willing workers (Ong, 2005). Contrary to the expectations of docile women and their attendant portrayal as helpless victims in the media, there have been numerous incidents and diverse performances of labour unrest well into the twenty-first century, ranging from factory strikes by migrant workers in China's Pearl River Delta and India (Chan & Ngai, 2009; Dutta, 2016), to sex-workers protesting against criminalisation in Cambodia (Sandy, 2013), and strikes by Bengali tea workers for higher wages in India (see Chatterjee, 2008).

Increasingly, labour activism is organised through cross-boundary strategizing and transnational networks operating at multiple scales, linking actors at different nodes of supply chains to articulate claims in different arenas of power (Bronfenbrenner (2007); McIntyre, 2008; Zajak, Engels-Zinden & Piper, 2017). The ILO's Convention on Domestic Labour (C189) is emblematic of this trend, as the outcome of multiple discussions, meetings, mobilisations, and advocacy efforts convened under the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), an alliance of over 500,000 workers active in fifty countries worldwide. Hailed as a breakthrough moment in the struggle for recognition by homeworkers, care-workers and others engaged in informal or casualised waged labour, its ratification in 2011 extended rights to an estimated 67 million domestic workers worldwide (ILO, 2015). Historically, the ILO's tripartite structure – centred on government, business, and organised labour – has served as a barrier to the participation of unwaged women and those in the informal sector, and as the culmination of a sustained campaign by women's rights advocates and feminist organisations, the convention marked an important victory, advancing more expansive conceptions of work hitherto overlooked by international institutions. Although C189 does not address the everyday unpaid work of social reproduction, the preceding campaign demonstrates how grassroots organising can spur shifts in international policy and broaden the parameters of debate – in this instance, over what counts as 'work' and the corresponding rights this should entail. For the first time, provision for daily and weekly rest hours, minimum wage entitlement, protection against harassment at work, and choice over where employees reside outside of work were guaranteed for waged domestic workers and enshrined in international law (D'Souza, 2010; Fish, 2015; ILO, 2015).

Contemporary struggles for recognition and rights around decent work continue to evolve, as domestic workers' testimony compiled by Geymonat, Marchetti and Kyritsis (2017) reveals. They interviewed members from the IDWF, who recount harrowing experiences of exploitation and describe how degrading conditions have been overcome through collective organisation. In Jordan and Lebanon, the agency of domestic migrant workers is severely curtailed by the *kafala* system, a private sponsorship scheme that makes residency and work permits dependent on the employer (Tayah, 2017). Britain is no different; 'since [2012] migrant domestic workers have been tied to their employers and enter the UK on a six-month non-renewable visa. They are unable to leave, even if escaping serious abuse including trafficking, without breaching the immigration rules, (Kalayan, 2014).¹¹ Strategies to combat such

¹⁰ For a critical reading of SEWA's role in the trade union movement, see (Kerswell and Pratap, 2017).

¹¹ Kalayan is a small London-based campaign organisation that works to ensure victims of modern slavery can live free for good. <http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/>.

conditions are also increasingly available: in South Korea, for example, a National House Managers Cooperative has sought to raise awareness about contracts and rights to claim compensation in the case of injury (Shim, 2017), and in South Africa, where the organisation of domestic workers has progressed from conversations between workers in churches and on the streets to the creation of a South African Domestic Workers Union, agitating for better conditions across the country (Witbooi, 2017). Major legislative achievements at a national level, such as the 'Freedom Charter for Domestic Workers' passed in 2007 by the Philippines Senate, and the passage of Uruguay's *Ley sobre Trabajo Doméstico*, which provides a similar guarantee of workers' rights, preceded C189 and provided an important foundation on which the ILO developed new policy (D'Souza, 2010). These mobilisations continue to spur more ambitious claims for rights and recognition, most significantly in efforts to challenge the boundary between paid and unpaid domestic labour. One significant success in this regard has been SDG 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It urges a recognition of the importance of unpaid domestic labour (5.4). However, despite a longstanding struggle to achieve this goal, the recognition of unpaid labour as 'work' remains a distant dream.

4. Gendering 'decent work': Lessons for the SDGs

Target 5.4 of SDG 5 urges state parties to 'recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household', advancing a vision of work that appears to be grounded in feminist labour theories of value and, in the wake of the C189, indicative of wider institutional trends. The first salvo in the direction of the UN to recognize women's unpaid work came from one of its own – Marilyn Waring, a feminist statistician at the UN. Critiquing the UN System of National Accounts, she wrote in her ground-breaking book, *If Women Counted*: 'When you are seeking out the most vicious tools of colonization, those that can obliterate a culture and a nation, a tribe or a people's value system, then rank the UNSNA among those tools' (Waring 1988, pp. 49). Her aim, later taken up by many other feminist political economists, was to initiate a campaign to persuade policy makers that the failure to count unpaid work both lay at the roots of gender inequality and caused serious flaws in the way economic trends were evaluated (see Rai, et al., 2014b). However, as Budlender notes in Rai et al. (2014a), 'There is... now a danger that unpaid care work can, as with gender and the environment, become a "cross-cutting issue" that will be referred to repeatedly but more as a sign of political correctness than of bringing about fundamental changes that could address the underlying problems' (2014a, pp. 527). Measurement can however, we argue, be one way of recognising social reproductive work; hence the feminist attempts to open up GDP, as a key measure of the strength of an economy, to scrutiny.

Per capita GDP – a crude measure of income derived from activity in the formal market economy – cannot, we argue, adequately capture the complex and diverse ways in which work is performed or experienced; the production and consumption of goods and services exchanged on the market says nothing about the conditions of work, the rights exercised by workers, or the ways in which gender inequalities pervades in the workplace. The gender pay gap, sexual harassment and the dismissal of pregnant women provide three particularly egregious examples of labour rights violations that persist across the world (Gammage & Stevanovic, 2016). As Folbre (1986) has noted, 'the emergence of capitalist relations of production transforms rather than merely weakens pre-existing patriarchal systems' (1986, pp. 251), and market institutions remain structurally embedded in patriarchal society. Labour legis-

lation, systems of job evaluation, and pay determination structures all operate as 'bearers of gender' that compound and entrench inequalities (Elson, 1999). Economic analysis at a household level also indicates that payment for women's labour does not necessarily entail an improvement in their relative position, if intra-household bargaining dynamics result in an outcome whereby men continue to control their income (Agarwal, 1997; Benería, 1995; Folbre, 1986, 2009; Sen, 1990). As time-use surveys have shown, time deprivation within gendered households is an important aspect to this puzzle and needs to be accounted for (Zacharias, 2017; Budlender, in Rai et al., 2014a). Specifically, men and women within the same household are time deprived differently reflecting gendered norms of care and social reproductive work. Social institutions, which limit women's autonomy and household bargaining power, are also liable to jeopardise other development outcomes, such as child mortality and girl's education (Branisa, Klasen & Ziegler, 2013). And, finally, gender segregated labour markets continue to depend on the unpaid social reproductive labour that is largely carried out by women. So, the feminist challenge is to move beyond an approach that retains the analytical framework and assumptions of neoclassical economics, which presumes the presence of a harmonious household and neglects asymmetrical power relations that may occur within it.

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Because of its focus on economic growth SDG 8 also overlooks the unpaid contribution of social reproductive work in maintaining healthy, cohesive and resilient communities. Feminists have argued that the flawed GDP calculation of what is deemed productive is harmful and leads to bad policy-making (Duffy, Albelda & Hammond, 2013; Elson, 2009; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007; Waring, 1988). For example, the withdrawal of state welfare provision in the aftermath of economic crises (and the lack of this provision at any time in many countries) leads to the increased reliance on unpaid work as a coping strategy, creating additional burdens that tend to be borne by women (Himmelweit, 2017; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007). Although GDP does account for the formal waged work performed by women, the sectors where they dominate the labour force, such as care and domestic work, tend to be systematically devalued and underpaid. Gender budgeting has been introduced as a policy intervention to address deficiencies in this field, tailoring resource allocation to advance the goals of gender equality through social welfare spending and ongoing monitoring of how fiscal policies impact gender disparities. Preliminary evaluations indicate some success, although its rollout has not been universal (Elson, 2003; O'Hagan, 2015; Stotsky, 2007). Nevertheless, despite the rise of gender 'mainstreaming' across the policies and programmes of all UN institutions, the 'empowerment of women and girls' harkened to in the SDGs is presented in instrumentalist

terms related to economic growth. This limits their potential to deliver transformative social change (Cornwell & Rivas, 2015; Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2017; Rai, 2003; Goetz, 2003). Hence our critique of SDG 8: SDG 5, with its core gender equity that tend to be neglected within SDG 8, challenges the UN development policy framework to rethink its suppositions about the economy and society (Paulson, 2017; Van de Burgh, 2007; Walby, 2005; Waring, 1988).

To challenge the exclusion of unpaid social reproduction from the production boundary, feminist economists and statisticians have shown how social reproduction can be measured and therefore included in the GDP. Techniques, such as time-use surveys, have been employed to show the gender segregated nature of this work. Time spent on social reproductive work can be measured either through its 'replacement value', calculating how much it would cost to replace unpaid workers with paid workers, or its 'opportunity value', based on the amount the unpaid worker would be earning if they were in the paid labour market instead of doing unpaid work (Hoskyns & Rai, 2016). Some countries, including Canada, South Africa and the UK, have experimented with what are called Household Satellite Accounts that show the contribution of unpaid social reproductive work to the national GDP. Making this contribution visible is an important element of insisting that states take into account the costs of unpaid social reproductive work. This visibility gives ballast to the call for increased state investment in social infrastructure – public services, health, education and training – and addresses policy gaps that are deeply tethered in the gendered assumptions of male bread winner model of employment generation (Razavi and Miller, 1995; Women's Budget Group, 2014). The point therefore is not the epistemic gap but the political one; this gap is replicated in the SDG 8 in its insistence upon GDP as the measure of growth and of development.

Concomitant with its emphasis on GDP growth, SDG 8 also seeks to 'encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all' (target 8.10), without considering how predatory lending practices of financial institutions have compounded inequalities and overlook the deleterious effects of under-resourced people entering credit markets at even the lowest level (Keating, Rasmussen & Rishi, 2010). By emphasising micro-entrepreneurialism as a route out of poverty (target 8.3), SDG 8 risks repeating these same mistakes (see Altan-Olcay, 2014; Kabeer, 2005). Financializing of the economy continues to abstract and commodify labour practices in ways that conceal the underlying processes of exploitation and the uneven sexual division of labour. In the contemporary period of financialisation, social reproduction is also being increasingly commodified: 'finance capital has no interest in supporting the reproduction of any national working class, but rather an interest in individualising responsibility for social reproduction to ensure households become customers for its products' (Himmelweit, 2017, pp. 1). This would appear to imperil, or even contradict, the possibility of realising 'decent work for all'. Here the linkage with the degrowth argument becomes clear; as Hornborg argues, 'political ideals of sustainability, justice, and resilience will only be feasible if money itself is redesigned' (2017, np).

SDG 8 does not just focus on the importance of economic growth and its measurement through GDP. SDG 8.2 aspires to 'higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors'. Here, the call for 'inclusive economic growth' and 'decent work for all' is then attached, implicitly, to the notion of social upgrading: improving the conditions of workers along global value chains through attention to inter-firm competitiveness (Selwyn, 2013). It is assumed that organisational learning through leading firms within the appa-

rel production network can have positive effects on productivity and efficiency – 'industrial upgrading' – but does not necessarily translate to gains for labour in terms of higher wages, freedom of association or collective bargaining (Ruwanpura, 2016; Barrientos, Gereffi & Rossi, 2011). Instead, it can be viewed as a reworking of labour's value to capital, predicated on constructed categories and 'interlocking hierarchies of social difference' (Werner, 2012, pp. 407). In an industry where gender, class, race/ethnicity are significant markers shaping labour relations, these scholars delineate the problematic assumption that economic upgrading results in social upgrading – and women workers benefit. Rather than assume elite actors, such as firms, nation states, and international organisations are capable of delivering improvements to the lives of workers, Selwyn (2013) cautions that insufficient attention is given to the agency of workers themselves, whose claims are neglected in corporate-led global governance initiatives (see also Dutta, 2016; Elias, 2005; Ruwanpura, 2016).

Whilst the mainstream view in economics has tended to view labour markets as neutral arenas, feminist scholarship has shown that the social institutions that uphold and maintain markets are inseparable from wider social norms and continue to ascribe gendered characteristics to the workforce (Dutta, 2016; Kucera & Tejani, 2014; Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016; Seguino, 2000). The experience of factory work for young women in the apparel industry is 'liberating' in some regards, granting autonomy from the rigid patriarchal control of their lives experienced in parochial village settings, and can offer higher wages and more job stability than equivalent work in the informal sector (Kabeer, 2004). Yet ultimately, this does not detract from the everyday realities of low pay, poor working conditions and labour rights abuses that remain a marked feature of such employment (Dutta, 2016; Mezzadri, 2017; Siddiqui, 2009; Werner, 2016). Moreover, the growing proportion of women in paid work has not altered the persistence of gender hierarchies and stereotyping – as the enduring preference in export processing zones for 'cheap, docile women' with 'nimble fingers' attests (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mezzadri, 2017; Ruwanpura, 2004). As Weeks (2011) observes, such work is instrumental in the formation of new, gendered subjectivities: 'the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members' (2011: 8). Finally, this limited 'liberation' does not mitigate the burdens of unpaid domestic work. Campaigns to address this double burden of paid and unpaid work has resulted in this concern being translated into SDG 5.4: to urge 'shifts in social norms to address the issue of women's unpaid domestic labour' through 'promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate'.

SDG 8.5 urges that member countries should achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men by 2030. As we have shown, the gendered nature of work and how it is framed in political and economic discourses militates against valuing some work over others. Mobilisation of 'cultural' and social status to bolster these gendered distinctions reinforces the inequality between 'productive' and 'non-productive' employment. Following the lives of garment workers in the Dominican Republic, Werner (2012) shows how the division of skilled and unskilled work in the labour process is linked to gendered perceptions of skill and ability, with men occupying managerial and supervisory positions and the presumption that sewing is a 'naturalised skill' for women, thus denying them training opportunities. This, Elias (2008) argues 'effectively disguise[s] the operation of a hegemonically masculine managerialism, which acts to privilege and fix specific forms of gender relations and identities within the workplace' (2008, pp 409; see also Elias, 2005, Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016). Managers criticise women workers for not learning more operations on the assembly line, while neglecting the addi-

tional responsibilities these workers bore in terms of childcare and housework. Similarly, in Bengal's tea plantations, Chatterjee (2008) illustrates the ethno-racial and gender assumptions that compound segmentation of the workforce, around seventy per cent of which is comprised of oppressed caste, *adivasi* (non-Hindu, autochthonous groups) or Nepali women, and thus excluded from opportunities for upward mobility in the labour hierarchy. The segmentation of the labour market is further manifested in the growing numbers of women from the Global South engaged in 'atypical forms of employment', concentrated around home-based, self-employed and informal forms of work (Gammage and Stevanovic, 2016; see also Ruwanpura, 2004).

5. Enter informal labour: Bridging paid and unpaid work

Informal labour remains of critical concern to the Decent Work Agenda. 'Most people enter the informal economy, which is characterized by low productivity and low pay, not by choice but impelled by the lack of opportunities in the formal economy and an absence of other means of livelihood. Informal employment constitutes more than one half of non-agricultural employment in most regions of the developing world' (ILO, 2016): 84% of workers in India, 75% in Bolivia, and 71% in Mali (ILO, 2013). Women are overrepresented in this sector, especially in the domestic work sector, which also prevents their access to social protection. Other than the Middle East and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, most economies have large concentration of women in the non-agricultural informal employment: for example, over 70 per cent in Honduras and Guatemala (ILO, 2013). In all circumstances, however, in Latin America, 'informality disproportionately affects women, young people and households at the bottom of the income distribution chain' (ILO, 2016, p. 11). In sub-Saharan Africa, 'the percentage of women in informal employment is higher than that of men in all countries for which data were available. Informal employment, as a share of total non-agricultural employment, ranges from 33 per cent in South Africa to 82 per cent in Mali' (ibid). However, informal work remains peripheral to the SDG 8, which rather emphasises the 'full and productive employment for all', and only acknowledges informal labour by way of their commitment to 'encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises' (8.3).

The informal sector first gained significant attention following a 1972 report from the ILO's Kenyan office, as a term to describe 'street hawkers, petty traders, shoeshine boys, and other groups 'under-employed' on the streets of the big towns,' occupations characterised by their ease of entry, small scale and by the absence of monitoring, regulation or taxation by the state (Bangasser, 2000, pp. 9). More recent definitions have extended this to include domestic and home-workers, street vendors, waste pickers, and other groups ranging from construction workers to small-scale farmers, and emphasise the vulnerability of informal workers, who face little access to social protection, denial of their labour rights and a lack of organisation and representation (ILO, 2013). For Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO, 2017), an international advocacy network founded to address these issues, the informal sector encompasses the self-employed, paid workers in informal enterprises, unpaid workers in family businesses, casual workers without fixed employer, sub-contract workers linked to informal enterprises and subcontract workers linked to formal enterprises. This broadened definition recognises not just enterprises but employment relationships (Chen, 2012), paving the way for a better understanding of how occupational segmentation, gender discrimination and exploitation intersect Ruwanpura (2008). SDG 8 misses crucial aspects of this work, which is deeply gendered.

The neglect of informal work can be traced back to a long line of orthodox thinking on economic development, which privileges waged work and the market at the expense of non-commodity labour performed largely by women, and simultaneously obscures the complex variations in women's experiences – where activities, such as growing subsistence crops, fetching firewood, and collecting drinking water, tend to remain particular to marginalised women in the Global South (Wood, 2003). In her study of *Myana* prawn harvesters in Gujarat, Fernandez (2018) provides a concrete example of this, showing how 'social reproductive labour becomes seemingly excluded from the now commodified circuits of exchange value', following the displacement of livelihoods to more marginal zones and declining rates of compensation for their labour in the household (2017, pp 6). By neglecting how production is simultaneously contingent on processes of social reproduction, and excluding the creation of non-market value, SDG 8 neglects crucial elements of everyday life and the constitutive role of unpaid domestic work as a cornerstone of the global economy (Safri and Graham, 2010).

The economic effects of informal labour are mirrored in contemporary experiences of precarious work that have emerged with neoliberal restructuring of the global economy. Changes wrought by the privatisation, marketization and deregulation have led to a decline in the provision of basic services and compounded inequalities (Dutta, 2016; Kabeer, 2004; Werner, 2016). In care work, for example, migration can be envisaged as 'a private solution to a public problem' in the absence of coordinated action (Hoschchild, 2002, pp. 18), with women from affluent families entering salaried employment, and migrant women filling the traditional wife's domestic duties, through paid informal work, while sending remittances back to their country of origin. As domestic and home-workers, they are frequently vulnerable to exploitation (see Gammage & Stevanovic, 2016; Geymonat, Marchetti, & Kyritsis, 2017). The feminisation of migration has been driven primarily by the commodification of care work over the last three decades, although the mobility of labour and capital arising from globalisation is not evenly matched: 'capital has benefited from the insecurity that immigrant labour faces in receiving countries since this insecurity weakens workers' ability to voice their demands and contributes to precarious labour conditions' (Benería et al., 2012: 5; see also Gamburd, 2000). Although these problems are acknowledged in target 8.8, 'protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment', there is little recognition of how the migratory patterns in global care chains can serve to reinforce inequalities. Despite offering care workers the opportunity to earn higher wages overseas, the prevailing arrangements between migrant workers and their employers underpin a process, which extracts care resources from poor countries and transfers them to wealthier nations overseas (Yeates, 2012). The outflow of Filipino mothers, for example, who seek work providing care for rich families in the USA, has left still poorer women in their country of origin to attend to their own children (Hoschchild, 2003). Care work provides a pertinent illustration of the deteriorating labour standards and working conditions that accompany growing precarity of labour, where contracts are often temporary and insecure, or altogether absent, with erratic or intermittent hours available to work. The impetus for greater attention on informal labour is related to the increasing precarity of workers, which corresponds to greater vulnerability and exposure to shocks and stresses. Gammage and Stevanovic (2016) emphasise the need to link SDGs to existing norms and conventions, such as the core standards of the ILO, in order to ensure informal workers are able to claim their rights.

6. From depletion to degrowth: Rethinking decent work

Despite the discourse on gender equality, there has been little subsequent gender shift in the performance of social reproductive work worldwide. Because SDG 8's focus on decent work and economic growth does not take into account the cost of this work it also does not address depletion accrued through social reproduction. As we have argued above, SDG 8 suffers from a dual disconnect: it relies on GDP which, preoccupies itself with tangible 'outputs', and in so doing, ignores the vital contributions of social reproductive work performed largely by women. In addressing decent work in this narrow way, it also does not take into account the fact that unpaid domestic work does not disappear if women enter paid work; rather, it increases their burden and their depletion. As Federici points out, 'The reproduction of human beings... and the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving' (2012, pp 2), and yet, GDP is based on the arbitrary division of the 'productive boundary', excluding forms of labour that exist outside the market. As Himmelweit (2017) argues, 'because engagement in the market cannot meet all social reproductive needs the tension that lies at the heart of capitalism between capital accumulation and sustainable forms of reproduction will inevitably reappear in new forms' (2017, pp. 1).

The non-recognition of social reproductive work and its consequences for individuals, households and communities can be conceptualized through what has been termed 'depletion through social reproduction (DSR)' (Rai et al., 2014b). If we examine the lack of such recognition of social reproductive labour in SDG 8, we find that depletion is an important concept (Elson, 2000; Rai et al., 2014b). Much of the conceptual vocabulary for understanding depletion is derived from environmental accounting and ecological economics, which sought to incorporate 'externalities' overlooked in neoclassical models and consider the environmental costs (in the form of degraded ecosystems, species extinction and declining regenerative capacities, such as nutrients cycling in soil and accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere) arising from resource extraction or exploitation. Whilst SDG 8.4 speaks of environmental degradation, here too like with unpaid domestic labour, considerations of growth override a recognition of environmental depletion in the only measure of growth outlined – GDP. Like unpaid domestic labour, the only recognition that we have seen of environmental depletion is through the Satellite Accounts to the GDP that some countries have supported, not their integration into the GDP (Hoskyns & Rai, 2007).

Rai et al. (2014b) define DSR as 'the level at which the resource outflows exceed resource inflows in carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold of sustainability, making it harmful for those engaged in this unvalued work' (2014: 3–4). Depletion through social reproduction is interwoven with regimes of the state and the market, as well as 'historically specific, culturally contested' social relations (*ibid*: 90). Crucially, the framework developed by Rai et al. (2014b) considers the multiple forms of harm that can arise from depletion – to individuals (adversely affecting their physical and mental health), to households (adversely affecting the relationships and material fabric of the home) and to the community (through erosion of public spaces accessed by all as well as of solidarity relations). It also harms by generating a very different politics of citizenship where those not recognised as workers (in the home) are also not recognised as citizens with entitlements against the state; rather they are constructed as recipients of welfare (*ibid*), recognising the diverse and varied manifestations of depletion in a world where work is increasingly precarious and insecure (Standing, 1999, 2012). Depletion increases with neoliberal restructuring and changing

labour markets, with women's unpaid work subsidising the withdrawal or reduction of public services. For example, Zaidi, Chigateri, Chopra, and Roelen (2017) show in the context of India, how the 'intensity and drudgery' of care tasks was strongly correlated to the extent and scope of public service provision, and emphasise that, while men's contribution to household labour was sporadic and intermittent, women's duties remained a constant in addition to any paid work they sought to pursue. In the absence of supportive social infrastructure or reliable public services, this compounded women's 'time poverty' and resulted in experiences fatigue, illness, physical pains and mental stress. Building on research on seven countries – Argentina, Chile, Ghana, Korea, Mexico, Tanzania and Turkey – Zacharias (2017) furthers this line of inquiry. He argues that when time and income poverty is included in understandings of poverty and material deprivation, time deficits were notable and substantial for low-income households. More importantly, he suggests that the gendered nature of time poverty means that policy measures, such as SDGs, needs to incorporate value of time in its measurements to ensure gender equity.

In this respect, valuation becomes problematic terrain for academics, activists and policymakers to navigate. On the one hand, 'valuation becomes a communication tool by translating unpaid work into a language that governments understand: money' (Hoskyns & Rai, 2007, pp 302). On the other, the continued valorisation of 'production' at the expense of life outside of work creates many quandaries, not least the difficulty – impossibility, even – of calculating value for the emotional and mental as well as physical labour required in acts of care, the often blurred boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work', and the reductive aspects of wages and payments which risks supplanting broader efforts to reconfigure social relations and pursue a more equitable, reciprocal balance of obligations between genders (Yeates, 2012; Weeks, 2011; Himmelweit, 2010). Nevertheless, we believe that valuation represents recognition, and therefore remains a powerful discursive strategy for highlighting the currently neglected depletion of workers' physical, mental and emotional capacities.

Addressing depletion accrued through social reproduction, largely overlooked in SDG 8, is critical to the realisation of gender equality envisioned in target 5.2 – 'recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family'. Three possible strategies are proposed by Rai et al. (2014b) to combat depletion of social reproduction. The first, mitigation, is the most accessible, and requires improved sharing of tasks within the household or community but may accentuate inequalities since it relies on individual action and may only push problems further down the care chain. The second, replenishment, which SDG 5.4 also emphasizes, involves inflows from the state or private bodies and may contribute to addressing structural gender inequalities, although gains can be reversed. Gender budgeting, which has been experimented with by over forty governments, is a vital first step in this regard. By rendering visible the gendered impacts of public policies, programmes and procedures it holds out the possibility of rectifying persistent inequalities by easing the burden placed on women and girls (Elson, 2003; O'Hagan, 2015; Stotsky, 2007). The third, transformation, entails a wholesale restructuring of social relations premised on reconfiguring the methods employed to value paid and unpaid labour, which again, SDG 5.4 also underlines, 'promotion of shared responsibility within the household'. Since recognition is a vital first step in such a process, the continued usage of GDP as the primary measure of economic success is antithetical to such a goal.

Growth-led GDP increases as targets have also, of course, been criticised in much broader terms (see [Van De Burgh, 2007](#)). This reflects widespread disillusionment with the very notion of ‘development’, decried by Wolfgang Sachs as ‘a plastic word, an empty word that lends positive valence to the most contradictory of intentions’ ([Sachs, 2017, pp 2](#)). Although we have sought to illustrate this primarily with reference to discontinuity between the goals concerning gender and decent work, such a discussion is incomplete without recognising the disjuncture between the SDGs’ overarching commitment to growth, and their professed concern for responsible production and consumption, tackling climate change, conserving the oceans, and protecting terrestrial ecosystems (SDGs 11, 12, 13 and 14). Sustaining the conditions for capital accumulation is contingent upon both the commodification of social relations, and accelerating use of material resources. Capitalism externalises costs onto gendered forms of unpaid labour, and simultaneously onto the wider biosphere. It is no wonder then that environmental scholars are concerned to show how unchecked environmental depletion has been a crucial part of the ‘growth story’ of industrial capital. These processes are interlinked, particularly since ecological stresses disproportionately impact women, manifesting themselves in gendered and racialized forms of depletion ([Hickel, 2015](#); [Rai et al., 2014b](#); [Sultana, 2014](#)). Although SDG 8.4 advocates the ‘decoupling’ of growth from production and consumption, it does not convincingly articulate how this would be possible or engage with literature on ecological limits ([Kallis, 2011](#); [Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010](#)).

It is in this context that the concept of degrowth has emerged, as both a provocation, and a powerful challenger to the productivist logics of mainstream policymaking, with its call for a reconsideration of the measures necessary to achieve societal wellbeing and ecological sustainability; and includes provisions which would contribute beneficially to replenishment and transformation ([D’Alisa, Deriu, & Demaria, 2015](#); [Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, & Martinez-Alier, 2013](#); [Kallis, 2011](#); [Martinez-Alier et al., 2010](#); [Paulson, 2017](#)). The nascent movement for degrowth endeavours to deliver a decolonised vision of wellbeing, seeking inspiration from various cultures and knowledge traditions, including the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir* (living well), ecological *swaraj* in India, and the philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanity towards others) in South Africa ([Paulson, 2017](#)). Degrowth scholars have sought to challenge misconceptions, emphasising that it is not about the ‘end of work’, but rather, examining ‘the type, quality and distribution of work. It is concerned with who has the jobs, the working week, job quality, care, life-long learning and work autonomy.’ ([Murphy, 2013: 81](#); see also [D’Alisa et al., 2015](#)). Similarly, while it seeks to remove the emphasis on endless material growth, as expressed within the SDGs, this does not preclude efforts ameliorating the condition of those in poverty through redistribution of resources ([Kallis, 2011](#)). In this respect, whilst formulations of degrowth to date have tended to focus on environmental limits and not been explicitly gendered, there are substantial overlaps with both the Decent Work agenda, and feminist concerns over the distribution of paid and unpaid work, care and income. As both [Murphy \(2013\)](#) and [Eicker and Keil \(2017\)](#) note, it finds particular resonance with feminist agendas to recognise the value of and redistribute unpaid care work, particularly in proposals to reduce the working week or provide a universal basic income ([D’Alisa et al., 2015](#); [Weeks, 2011](#); [Elias and Rai, in press](#)). Such manoeuvres would pivot sharply away from a ‘male breadwinner’ model, bridge the gap between paid and unpaid work, and enable care and domestic work to be shared more equitably. Embracing the prospect of degrowth would signal a dramatic shift in thinking, responding both to the changing nature of work and the ecological crisis in a theoretically consistent manner.

7. Conclusion

The SDGs have set out a broad and aspirational agenda under the banner ‘transforming our world’. Whilst the consultative process has been praised by many as a marked improvement from the top-down approach of the MDGs, which were seen to be imposed by powerful global actors onto developing countries), there have also been sharp criticism of the SDGs. The goals remain trapped within a set of frames disconnected from broader movements for global justice ([Cornwell & Rivas, 2015](#)), and leave the underlying structures of global capitalism largely unchallenged. The long list of targets abounds with contradictions and cannot stand in for a comprehensive and coherent vision of change. Indeed, as we have argued, the SDG agenda is largely a traditional development agenda – continuing to conflate sustainability with growth, industrialisation with development and transformation with productivity, technological change, and resource efficiency ([Esquivel, 2016](#)). Ultimately, the SDGs seem to explicitly endorse the contemporary global governance system – highlighting the ‘importance for international financial institutions to support, in line with their mandates, the policy space of each country’ (para 44) – rather than challenging and making a priority the reconfiguration of power relations in the governance architecture of development. As [Ehgartner et al., \(2017: 72\)](#) observe: ‘behind the language of global responsibility, intra-species solidarity and shared values exists a sociotechnical apparatus grand in design yet unmoored from its consequences... everybody is complicit but nobody immediately guilty.’ Transforming the world is then to be achieved through familiar modes of disciplinary governance, neglecting a crucial feminist insight: ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ ([Lorde, 1984](#)).

Our concern in this article has been to point to the gendered gaps in the SDGs, through examining specifically SDG 8. We have argued that gender is a crucial lens to understand, strategize for and implement the goals and targets of development. We have suggested that the targets of SDG 8 at times contradict and sit in tension with each other. Indeed, we stress that the overall approach of compartmentalising the SDGs without relating them to each other is problematic (see also [International Council for Science, 2017](#)). We have demonstrated this by bringing into conversation SDG 8 and 5 and showed how the two are fundamentally at odds with each, reflecting the piecemeal nature SDGs; or to put it differently, dividing “development” into discrete goals runs counter to recognizing the structural and systematic connections that underpin these goals and aspirations.

Our argument has built on a review of ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, which emerged from historical trade union struggles and led to a broadening of its agenda to include formal as well as informal work and conditions of work relating to both in its ambit. However, we have also argued that while on the one hand, the ILO has broadened its focus from a preoccupation with the formal sector to concerns with the informal sector (*Domestic Workers Convention*), on the other, it has accepted the informal embrace of corporate governance initiatives (*Better Work*). This is an important ‘long view’ of the debates on the decent work agenda espoused by SDG 8. A gender lens allows us to trace the ways in which women workers have been incorporated into the global economy without redistributing the gendered roles within their households, leading to a significant double burden problem for them. Further, we argue that this lack of attention to the redistribution of gendered social reproductive roles and to the wage inequalities in a gender segregated labour market actually support the narrow growth agenda ([Seguino, 2000](#)), which SDG 8 also supports. The emphasis on growth, its measurement through growth rates and per capita GDP sits uneasily with SDG 5.4 – which calls for

recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work. The non-recognition of this unpaid domestic labour, we further argue leads to increased levels of depletion through social reproduction among women who are the majority of primary carers in households. This depletion affects not only individual women but also their households and communities, especially in the context of state withdrawals of investment in social infrastructure in times of economic crises. Women's wage employment while considered a panacea in the SDGs, we argue, can actually increase the depletion of women if not replenished through state social infrastructural support, redistribution of gender care roles and the recognition of domestic labour. The language of growth itself needs to be challenged as reflected in the debates about degrowth and epistemic decolonisation if we are to make development environmentally sustainable, gender just and economically equitable.

Conflict of interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.09.006>.

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